

# An Historical Perspective on Contemporary Linguistic Anthropology

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

A recent review of a several popular textbooks in cultural anthropology has confirmed my suspicion that there is a significant gap between what linguistic anthropology means to me and what it means to my colleagues in cultural anthropology (and probably in other sub-fields as well). One easy explanation of this gap would be to say that the authors of these textbooks are simply uninformed of what linguistic anthropologists have been doing in the last 20-25 years. But this could be easily shown to be only partly accurate.

For one thing, in at least some of the chapters I have examined so far, sections are often dedicated to recent debates, such as Ebonics, or topics such as language and gender, which show that our colleagues in cultural anthropology do follow at least some of what goes on in our field. Furthermore, the criticism might be unfair because most of the chapters on language I have examined seem conceived as a mini-introduction to linguistics rather than to linguistic anthropology. This is shown by the considerable space usually occupied by basic information on language structure (e.g. phonology, morphology, syntax) and the coverage of topics like animal communication, typically found in introductory linguistics textbooks (but not as part of mainstream linguistics or contemporary linguistic anthropology).

Finally, it would be too easy to blame cultural anthropologists for this gap without seriously considering the possibility of failure on the part of linguistic anthropologists to communicate more effectively across disciplinary boundaries. I believe that to the extent to which we are committed to a holistic view of anthropology, we should provide teaching tools and accessible review pieces for our colleagues in other fields. My efforts in this direction in the past have been rewarded<sup>2</sup> and I think we should continue to provide useful

surveys, introductions and encyclopedia entries. But I also think it is important to provide an historical analysis of major theoretical and methodological trends. Stephen Murray's *American Sociolinguistics: Theorists and Theory Groups* (1998) is a step in this direction, but the author's lack of terminological rigor<sup>3</sup> and his reluctance to synthesize movements and trends beyond the work of small groups make it difficult to use, especially by non-specialists.

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## Paradigm shifts

After a recent review of the history of linguistic anthropology and its contemporary trends (Duranti 2001a), I have come to the conclusion that since the 1880s, there has been at least one major paradigm shift (and perhaps two) in the study of language from within anthropology in the U.S. These shifts are represented by various names by which the study of languages is called within anthropology. The first shift took place in the early 1960s and has continued to develop in ways that could be interpreted as the signs of a subsequent shift in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

I should point out that I am using the term "paradigm" to mean something related to but different from that found in Kuhn (1962). Simply stated, by "paradigm shift" I mean a change in what phenomena are studied, with what methods and with what goals. I do not assume that the rise of a new "paradigm" implies the end of the immediately prior one. I assume that it is possible for several paradigms to co-exist and even for individual researchers to shift back and forth from one paradigm

to the other (for this reason, Kuhn's concept of "scientific revolution" does not fully apply here). The co-existence of two or more paradigms might be a source of confusion for those outside of a specific field.

My hypothesis is that the impact of the fundamental changes within linguistic anthropology that have taken place starting in the 1960s has not been fully recognized by our colleagues in other fields, who often continue to think of linguistic anthropologists as if they were still operating within the first paradigm. Support for this hypothesis can be found by comparing the organization, topics and theoretical perspective of the chapters on language in cultural anthropology textbooks with the topics, issues and theoretical concepts that currently constitute the bulk of research in linguistic anthropology. As I will argue below, the emphasis on descriptive linguistics, the interest in language as a classificatory tool and the recurrent reference to the "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis" are all indications of a conception of the scope of the field and its basic assumptions that are part of the first paradigm.

## The Boasian Tradition and the Birth of Anthropological Linguistics

Linguistic anthropology as practiced in the U.S. (and Canada) is part and parcel of the Boasian tradition of four-field anthropology. This tradition, as far as I know, is not found anywhere else in the world and certainly not in Europe, where linguists until recently have not been part of anthropology departments. Instead, in the U.S., linguistics in the modern sense of the term started from within anthropology. The first issues of the *American Anthropologist* are full of articles on (especially) American Indian languages, and Boas' Introduction to the *Handbook of American Indian Languages* (1911) can be considered the modern manifesto for the study of non-Indo-European languages. It has influenced several generations of linguists in the U.S. and abroad.

Boas' writings and teachings established what I consider the first paradigm for the study of language within anthropology. It is a paradigm that originated with the support of John Wesley Powell

at the Bureau of (American) Ethnology, and it was meant to collect information on American Indian languages as a tool for the classification of American Indian tribes in the US. Through Boas and others, it became an important part of "salvage anthropology," a project that continues today with efforts to document and revitalize endangered languages (Grenoble & Whaley 1998; Moore 1999).

Most of the work done within this first paradigm was (and still is) dedicated to what we call now *descriptive linguistics*. In this paradigm, linguistic analysis is an important tool for cultural (and historical-genetic) analysis. Over time, this view of linguistics within anthropology turned into an either accepted or forced upon "service mentality," whereby the presence of the linguist was justified as long as he or she provided basic fieldwork training for (cultural) anthropology students (Pike 1963; Voegelin & Harris 1952). With the expansion of linguistics departments in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s, this function of the linguist in the anthropology department became less crucial. It is thus not surprising that several departments in the 1970s and 1980s decided not to replace their linguists after they retired or moved to other institutions. A reversal of this change has been seen in the last decade.

Boas' students and the generation immediately following saw themselves primarily as "linguists," and this explains the term "anthropological linguists" that they adopted for themselves in the 1950s (see Duranti 2001 for a discussion of the meaning of various terminological choices). Like all linguists then and most linguists today, they elicited linguistic expressions from native speakers in order to describe grammars and lexicons of up to then unwritten languages. This had two effects. One was that some of these scholars found a home in linguistics departments (e.g. Mary Haas), and the other was that their mission of collecting information and documenting American Indian languages was adopted by linguists with very little or no training in anthropological history and theory. Given these trends, eventually, "anthro-

logical linguistics" became largely identified with *descriptive (and often historical) linguistics of non-Indo-European languages with no indigenous tradition of writing* (see the definition given by Hoijer 1961). Therefore, it was identified with a non-theoretical approach to the study of language, with one important exception: the misnamed "Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis—the two scholars never collaborated on a joint definition—also known as "linguistic relativity." There are at least two popular versions of this "hypothesis": (i) different languages provide different conceptualizations of reality; (ii) linguistic categorization has an impact on speakers' thinking (and acting) in the world. Whereas no linguist would have any qualms with the first version, which is routinely experienced by any translator, the second version has been highly controversial, especially since the 1960s. Berlin and Kay's (1969) study of color terms was the harshest (although still controversial) blow to the relativists (Hill & Mannheim 1992; Gumperz & Levinson 1996; Levinson 2000).

### First Paradigm Shift: Linguistic Variation and the Ethnography of Communication

In the early 1960s a new paradigm appeared which redefined what kinds of linguistic phenomena one should study, how they should be studied and the theoretical perspective through which to think about language. The new perspective had two main foci of research interests: (i) social variation in language use, and (ii) language use in communicative events. The two research interests were united in John Gumperz and Dell Hymes' collaboration (1964, 1972), resulting in the school known as "the Ethnography of Communication."

During the early period of this new paradigm, two important terminological changes also took place: First, Hymes argued for the term "linguistic anthropology" over "anthropological linguistics," to stress that the field should assume anthropological concerns (Hymes 1964). Second, the term sociolinguistics was introduced by Wil-

liam Labov for his study of language variation in urban communities, and adopted as a general term for the study of language use, as shown by the fact that Gumperz and Hymes' 1972 collection was entitled *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*.

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This second paradigm sharply differentiates itself from the first in two important ways: (i) linguistic expressions are studied in context, meaning that researchers pay special attention to at least some of the attributes of the situations in which language is used. (This is a radical departure from the almost exclusive reliance on elicitation that characterized the first paradigm from Boas to Berlin and Kay's survey of individual color terms and beyond.) (ii) Speaking itself is studied as a cultural activity, with its own organization to be described through ethnography (see Hymes 1972a and his Speaking Model).

These are major shifts with respect to the first paradigms for a number of reasons. One is the emphasis on what speakers do with language (see connections with speech act theory, i.e. Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Another is the focus on social units (e.g. speech communities, speech events and speech situations) as opposed to grammatical units (e.g. the word, the sentence). A third is the importance of an ethnographic understanding of the interactions in which language is used, e.g. in order to describe communicative competence (Hymes 1972b). A fourth reason is the attempt to take variation seriously and make sense of it through a theory of "relevant context."

A consequence of this shift was the temporary abandonment of linguistic relativity, at least in its popular version. Its identification with ways of classify-

ing experience—the infamous multiplication of the words of ‘snow’ in Eskimo from four to one hundred and more—is a primary example of this (see Martin 1986 for an analysis of this myth).

In a paradoxical twist of fate, while stressing the need to relocate the field within anthropology, Hymes (1964) simultaneously set the stage for fuller theoretical and methodological autonomy for ethnographers of speaking from the rest of anthropology. The concentration on ritual encounters as opposed to grammar and lexicon (Erving Goffman had a noticeable influence on those operating within this paradigm) freed them from the old “service mentality.” At the same time, it exposed them to two risks: the overlap with research areas usually studied by cultural anthropologists and the associated abandonment of their most valued good, namely, their expertise in language structures (in both a synchronic and diachronic perspective).

These two risks have unfolded in interesting ways in the last few years, producing a new generation of young scholars who are a mixture of linguistic and cultural anthropologists, and attracting other scholars from related fields, including applied linguistics, communication, discourse analysis, second language acquisition and education. This has been made possible for a number of reasons, one being more recent theoretical developments.

### Recent Developments or Paradigm Three?

One of the important contributions of the second paradigm is the focus on language in context. Context is used to explain variation (why people’s pronunciation or lexical choice changes across time and space), and is also the object of ethnographic description (e.g. communicative events). Rather than being studied as isolated forms (as done in the first paradigm), linguistic expressions are embedded within larger activities or events. A further development of this new interest in context is the focus on language as context. The use of language is seen as constituting (sometimes actually “creating”) the contexts

in which it occurs or the entities that is supposed to refer to (e.g. social identity, social relationships). Although this idea is already found in Hymes’ (1972a) concept of “speech event” (an event largely defined by speech, e.g. an oral examination, an interview) and Blom and Gumperz’ (1972) notion of “metaphorical shift” (a type of code switching that brings about a change in context), it becomes a leading and pervasive concept in the linguistic anthropology of the 1980s and 1990s. It is also a research focus that eventually contributes to the separation of linguistic anthropologists from quantitative sociolinguists for whom context is still an independent variable (see Duranti 2001b; Goodwin and Duranti 1992).

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My view is that one can make sense of most of the work done within linguistic anthropology since the mid-1970s as an attempt to sharpen the analytical tools for the study of context and its relevance to an understanding of how language is used by social actors. In particular, it is the challenge to define context and make it into an object of study that motivates three important areas of contemporary research: performance, indexicality and participation (Duranti 1997:14-21).

Performance originated in different traditions. Chomsky (1965) used it instead of Ferdinand de Saussure’s (1966) notion of *parole*, Bauman (1975) and Hymes (1975) used it as a creative and emergent mode of using language, and Austin (1962) implied it as the domain of ‘doing things with words’ in his notion of *performative*. More recently, feminist theorists have extended the notion of performance to *performativity* to account for the ways in which gender is discursively produced (Hall 1999). The main point here is that language is considered a domain of action in which agency is constantly an issue as opposed to a system of predefined rules that are separate from social life.

Whether one looks at Michael Silverstein’s (1976) elaboration of Jakobson’s notion of “shifter” and Peirce’s notion of “index,” or Elinor Ochs’ (1979) argument that “transcription is theory” (a position that predates Clifford and Marcus’ (1986) invitation to rethink the process of writing culture), what we have seen in the last twenty five years is increased attention paid to the mechanisms through which speakers and analysts use language as a resource for the constitution of the very social reality they are trying to describe. The notion of indexicality is one way of making sense of the historicity and context-ness of language (Hanks 1990, 1999).

In the last two decades we have also seen an increased attention to the details of face-to-face encounters, inspired in part by interactional sociology, ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (Heritage 1984). In addition, new recording technologies (video in particular) have allowed us to collect audio-visually rich data that can be played again and again, and thus be submitted to more systematic scrutiny by ourselves and by others (Duranti 1997: chapter 5). The attention to detail has helped us deconstruct the speaker-hearer dyad and refine Goffman’s (1981) intuitions about participation frameworks. By looking at language use in classrooms, neighborhoods and workplaces, linguistic anthropologists have shown that the ways in which problem-solving, conflict and narrative activity are organized are much more complex than what is usually assumed by those who interpret language as “content” or as a series of monologic “stories.”

More generally, there has been in recent research in linguistic anthropology a radical—albeit often too implicit—criticism of the elicitation techniques used by grammarians and ethnographers. Michael Silverstein’s (1981) work on the limits of awareness as well as the myriad empirical studies of the social organization of verbal performance in ritual and mundane encounters (e.g., Hill and Irvine 1993) are evidence of this trend. Some of these challenge past and current ideas about

gender roles (Goodwin 1990) and narrative structure (Ochs & Capps 1996, 2001). In the context of these new studies, the very notion of linguistic relativity needs to be reassessed. We need to explore further Whorf's original intuitions about how linguistic categorization is analogically transferred to other cognitive realms (Lucy 1992a, 1992b). We also need to rethink relativity in terms of the new research on language ideology (Schieffelin, Woolard, Kroskrity 1998; Kroskrity 2000) and in terms of how access to linguistic resources presupposes and embodies access to other kinds of resources in economic, intellectual and moral spheres.

Instead of having to choose between taking for granted or ignoring altogether the "power of language," linguistic anthropologists have developed analytical tools that allow us to look closely at what language does versus what speakers qua social actors do. If we attempt to understand this distinction, including its validity and the implicit rethinking of the concepts of intentionality and agency that it requires, we get a clearer picture of language structure and language use that we need to present to our students. Linguistic forms would be shown to get their meaning from the historical and moment-by-moment constructed context of their use.

### Conclusions

I have presented here a hypothesis about what I see as an intellectual gap between the discussion of language in anthropology textbooks and the great bulk of research within contemporary linguistic anthropology. I have suggested that to a great extent cultural anthropology textbooks remain within the logic, topics and issues identified within what I call the first paradigm in linguistic anthropology. This started over a century ago with Boas' program for a four-field anthropology and continues today with the study of endangered languages and with comparative studies of isolated (i.e. taken out of context) linguistic forms (e.g. color terminology). What is particularly missing then in much of contemporary treatment of language within cultural anthropol-

ogy textbooks is a fuller understanding of the role that language plays in the context of our daily life. For this understanding to occur we need specific conceptual tools. In their study of performance, indexicality and participation linguistic anthropologists have developed and refined such tools. Students in cultural anthropology and other sub-fields should be exposed to current work in linguistic anthropology and thus given a chance to test their power to explain how and why language plays such an important part in our lives.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This essay briefly expands on some of the discussion found in Duranti (2001b). A more detailed discussion of paradigm shifts in linguistic anthropology will be presented in a forthcoming paper entitled "Three Paradigms for the Anthropological Study of Language in the U.S."

<sup>2</sup> For example, when I organized a special "educational" session at the 1998 AAA Meetings in which I invited 28 colleagues to talk (for 7 minutes each) about the latest perspectives on "language matters," many colleagues from other fields, especially cultural anthropology, enthusiastically attended the session, enduring 3 hours and 45 minutes of non-stop talk. (The proceedings of that session, expanded to include 74 authors, were published as a special issue of the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology, Duranti 1999, and as a book, Duranti 2001a.)

<sup>3</sup> For example, despite the fact that the book is called "American Sociolinguistics," the first sentence of the first chapter reads: "This study of postwar anthropological linguistics in North America..." (Murray 1998:1). The ambiguity about the focus and boundaries of the study unfortunately remain throughout the book, which ends without a concluding statement about general trends.

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